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Japanese Food Self-Sufficiency and Local Initiatives to Improve It

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Have you ever wondered what the level of food self-sufficiency is in your country? If you live in a place where food is abundant and agriculture is thriving, you may not have even thought about it before. The circumstances surrounding food issues and agriculture are dramatically changing, however, especially with an increasing number of natural disasters like droughts and floods caused by extreme climate phenomena having a direct impact. In addition, depending on the kind of food being produced, formerly major food-exporting countries such as India and China have become food importers, spurred on by their increasing populations and changing eating habits. Then there is the issue of increasing "food miles," the overuse of energy eaten up by long-distance food transportation, along with the corresponding growth in greenhouse gas emissions. Under the circumstances, it is important to pay attention to the rate of food self-sufficiency, which indicates how well a country can feed its citizens without relying on imported food. As this issue is closely related to any nation's security, it is drawing public attention in Japan, too.

Current Status of Japan's Food Self-Sufficiency Rate

The food self-sufficiency rate is an indicator that shows how much daily food per capita is produced within a country. In Japan, it is based on calories and is calculated as daily domestically supplied calories per capita divided by daily totally supplied calories per capita.

Self-sufficiency in grains is also often used to compare between countries, as almost complete data from industrial and developing countries are available.

The food self-sufficiency rate in Japan was 78 percent in 1961, but it has since been in a long decline. Within a decade, it had dropped to 58 percent in 1971, down 20 percent. In 1989, it actually fell below the

50-percent level. Since 1998, the figure has been hovering around 40 percent. In fiscal 2006, it broke the 40-percent level, declining to 39 percent, which made media headlines and the topic frequently comes up in discussions. The figure is the lowest among major industrialized countries. In Switzerland, whose food self-sufficiency is comparatively lower than other countries, the rate varies between 50 and 60 percent, while in Korea, Japan's next-door neighbor, it is a little lower than 50 percent.

Almost 100 percent of Japan's own staple food rice is produced in Japan. Self-sufficiency in grains as a whole, however, was only 28 percent in fiscal 2008, well below the overall food self-sufficiency rate. This is because grains used for livestock feed, such as corn, come mostly from imports. Moreover, Japan is only 10 to 20 percent self-sufficient in the production of the wheat and buckwheat needed to make bread and noodles.

From among the various factors involved in the rate's decline to 40 percent -- down by nearly half from the previous 78 percent -- is a general trend of moving away from local agricultural production and depending more heavily on imports, but one of the biggest factors is changing eating habits. As the country grew richer, people became more westernized in their food choices. For example, the consumption of meat and food oils has trebled or even quadrupled since 1960, while the consumption of rice has been almost halved. This means that the consumption of domestically produced food has decreased, while the appetite for imported food has grown. This trend is largely what has spurred on the dwindling food self-sufficiency rate in Japan.

Improving the Food Self-Sufficiency Rate

Japan's food self-sufficiency can now be said to be at a critical level. Against this backdrop, the government is working to increase the rate to 45 percent by fiscal 2015, from the current 40 percent. To do so, it is conducting an initiative dubbed "Food Action Nippon" to promote homegrown produce and raise awareness among people so they can take concrete actions.

FOOD ACTION NIPPON (Only in Japanese)

<http://syokuryo.jp/index.html>

One of the projects that the government is particularly putting effort into is promoting the use of rice flour (ground rice powder). As the consumption of rice as a staple has been decreasing, the government is seeking ways to encourage its consumption, such as promoting its use as a powder like wheat flour. Rice flour is attracting much attention in Europe and the United States as an alternative for people with an allergy to wheat gluten. Here in Japan, it has long been used as an

ingredient in traditional sweets and other foods.

In addition to exploring the potential for rice flour for such uses, the government is taking the lead in conducting public relations activities to boost rice flour consumption. For example, it established a special website to introduce a wide range of recipes and products using rice flour, not only for traditional sweets but also main dishes and western cakes and desserts, as well as supporting a variety of events held by local communities and food-related companies.

Japanese Industries Promote Rice Flour for Increase in Food Self-Sufficiency

<http://www.japanfs.org/en/pages/029645.html>

The government calls these companies and organizations that promote domestic products like rice flour and hold events to raise awareness its "Promotion Partners." It has been interacting with food-related companies and those supporting domestic products in order to increase the number of Partners from 2,000 and more, as of October 2009, to 5,000 within fiscal 2010.

Another example of the government's initiatives is the Marche Japon project ("Japan Market" in French), which was launched in the fall of 2009. There are 17 locations across the country that recreate the atmosphere of the farmers markets in the streets and squares of Europe and the United States, marketed with the message: "Delicious food, direct from producer, lively market." Domestically produced vegetables are sold at these markets, together with dairy products and processed foods. While some have gained popularity with regular customers, others come to shop because they find these weekly farmers markets fun.

Marche Japon (Only in Japanese)

<http://www.marche-japon.org/>

In contrast to just picking out food at the supermarket and putting it into a shopping cart, the farmers markets attract people who want to learn about seasonally available foods and get ideas on how to serve and cook them, find rare foods, and above all, enjoy talking with food producers and sellers. For producers, it is attractive too because they can talk face to face with their customers and find out more about what they really want, which is not just helpful but greatly encourages them to keep growing food. Therefore, the Marche Japon project is beneficial for both producers and consumers.

In addition to conducting public relations activities targeted at consumers, the government also introduced a new subsidy program in 2010 for food-producing farmers. The model measurement for compensating

individuals with income for farming, launched in April, is an initiative to increase the food self-sufficiency rate by conducting the following two projects: (1) one focused on enhancing the utilization of rice paddies to improve the food self-sufficiency rate, and (2) a model project for compensating individuals with income for rice production. The former is a simple and easily understandable subsidy system aimed at encouraging the production of crops for which self-sufficiency rates are low by more fully utilizing rice paddies across the country. The latter is to finance rice production to stabilize rice-farming management.

Specifically, under the first project, the government provides support to commercial farming households and village farmers who produce crops such as wheat, soybeans, rice for rice flour, and feedstock in rice paddies. Increasing production of these food products should lead to improving Japan's self-sufficiency rate and ensure that farmers can achieve an equivalent level of income to that generated solely by producing rice as a staple. Payments are made based on a unit price per 100 square meters for each crop. The idea is to control the surplus of rice production and increase the production of crops that are key to increasing the self-sufficiency rate.

Under the second initiative -- the model project for compensating farmers for producing rice -- the government is trying to eliminate the chronic problem of cost pressures by providing a flat sum of 15,000 yen (about U.S.\$161) per 100 square meters of cultivated land for rice as a staple to farmers who produce according to a quantified production target. Even so, the level of direct compensation for Japanese farmers is still less than one-third of that in Europe and the United States pricewise, which means measures to increase domestic production are still lagging. With these new systems introduced, it is hoped that the burden on farmers will be reduced and the number of new farm successors will grow.

In response to the call by the government, citizens are starting many initiatives, too. While shopping, more and more people are checking food product labels and buying domestically produced vegetables even if the price is higher than imported ones, due in part to recent incidents in which an illegal pesticide was detected in imported vegetables. Restaurants, however, are not obligated to show the origin of the ingredients they use, so diners have no idea where the food they are served comes from.

Against this backdrop, the Midori Chochin Movement (meaning "green Japanese paper lanterns"), which started in Hokkaido in northern Japan to encourage restaurants to show they use local food ingredients, has gradually spread across Japan. The paper lantern is made of "washi"

(Japanese paper) covering a thin bamboo frame in a spiral shape with a candle inside (nowadays an electric bulb is used instead of a candle). Traditionally, it is used as a flashlight and as an outdoor light hung from the eaves of buildings. The idea was sparked by the use of aka chochin (red paper lanterns), also a nickname for bars where working fathers will typically stop for a drink on their way home from work.

The Midori Chochin Movement picked up on this. Restaurants are eligible to put up a green lantern if more than 50 percent of the ingredients they use are domestically produced. The lantern has a one-to-five star rating, with one star being the lowest rating of more than 50 percent domestically produced ingredients. The number of stars goes up for each 10 percent increase, so restaurants using domestic ingredients in 90 percent or more of its food ingredients have a five-star green lantern. The lantern is easy to recognize and is said to be a useful tool to appeal to those who are concerned about the food self-sufficiency rate.

Japanese Pubs and Restaurants Display Green Lanterns to Promote Local Produce
<http://www.japanfs.org/en/pages/027032.html>

Besides these efforts, a network is being built among farming successors -- the new generation of young farmers across Japan -- and highly conscious consumers, and various organizations are working to connect agriculture with regular people. For example, some non-profit organizations (NPOs) are working to create a system that supports twenty-first-century agriculture. Another NPO started a program to cultivate idle and abandoned farmland, inviting the participation of city dwellers and providing weekend programs to bring them to rural areas to work in cultivation as part of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of companies. Municipalities and companies are also increasingly promoting support for citizens to directly engage in farming and providing community gardens.

'Agrizm' Quarterly Agriculture Magazine for Young People Launched in Japan
<http://www.japanfs.org/en/pages/029961.html>

It is also important for citizens to rethink their own dietary habits, the current situation of Japanese agriculture, as well as global agricultural and food trends, by looking into the food self-sufficiency rate and asking, "Where does the food we eat everyday come from? And will it be possible to grow and get food in the future?" Now is a time of important milestones in moving toward a more ideal future by searching out accurate information, selecting things based on it, thinking about what we can do, and then taking action.